

News

Lawsuit blames backyard pile of problems on Princeton University

Wednesday, February 24, 2010

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on Princeton

Staff Report

ROBBINSVILLE — Stephanie Rayhon thought she and her mother were lucky to find a lovely ranch home on 10 acres here in 2008. Little did they know then.

They'd lived in the old family homestead in Edison, but her mother Patricia had medical problems that required living on one floor, and they were happy to buy the place at 83A Church St.

At the back of the property was what appeared "to be a road going to somewhere else," Stephanie said. "We hadn't really thought about it." After the closing and all the paperwork was finalized, she said, "we didn't think anything more of it.

"And then one day in August of last year, we came home and found a notice of violation tacked up to our door, and it was from Robbinsville Township," Stephanie said.

"And they were saying there was a violation of soil importation. There was a cease and desist (order)." Dumping in wetlands was mentioned, she said. "And it said we had to file for permits with them, and we had to submit a plan to them for remediation.

"We had pretty much a minor heart attack," Stephanie said. "And of course it was a Friday afternoon, and we had just gotten back from taking my dog to the vet. The office was closed, and we couldn't even call Robbinsville and say, 'What's going on?' That was a fun weekend."

Stephanie Rayhon, an early drug development specialist at Bristol-Myers Squibb, was appalled over what Robbinsville charged was an estimated 1,500 truckloads of construction material dumped illegally back there — debris, rocks, concrete chunks and other material. It was smoothed out — looked sort of like a road. She and her mother had no idea it was even there. The township wants it all removed.

"We had a home in Edison, and we find a place that was better for my mother, and we move, and this happens," said Stephanie. "Since last August, it's been pretty horrible, six months of having this hanging over your head and just wondering in the end whether you're going to be bankrupted."

This wasn't the specialty of their closing lawyer, so they hired Lieberman & Blecher, which filed suit this week in Mercer County Superior Court against Princeton University, from which the material is believed to have originated, J&J Hauling and principal Al Bonaduce of Somerville, and the previous owners.

The suit alleges that the Rayhons "purchased their home in June of 2008 from their neighbors" — Todd and Darlene Knapp — who "had accepted the material, which is believed to have originated from Princeton University, and created a large berm that extends a staggering 890 feet in length with a width of 18 to 22 feet," according to a statement issued yesterday by Lieberman & Blecher.

The suit alleges the material was "allegedly dumped on the property without necessary state or local permits" before the Rayhons purchased it.

A Princeton University spokeswoman said Princeton hadn't received notification of the suit and had no comment. Stephanie Rayhon, however, said contact had been made by letter with Princeton, "and they haven't denied it (the dumping). Their attitude is, 'It's clean fill; so what?'"

Stuart Lieberman said Robbinsville and Mercer County officials "have been helpful and want to work with us. We're trying to get everybody together, to pay to have joint funding for the removal of the matter."

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